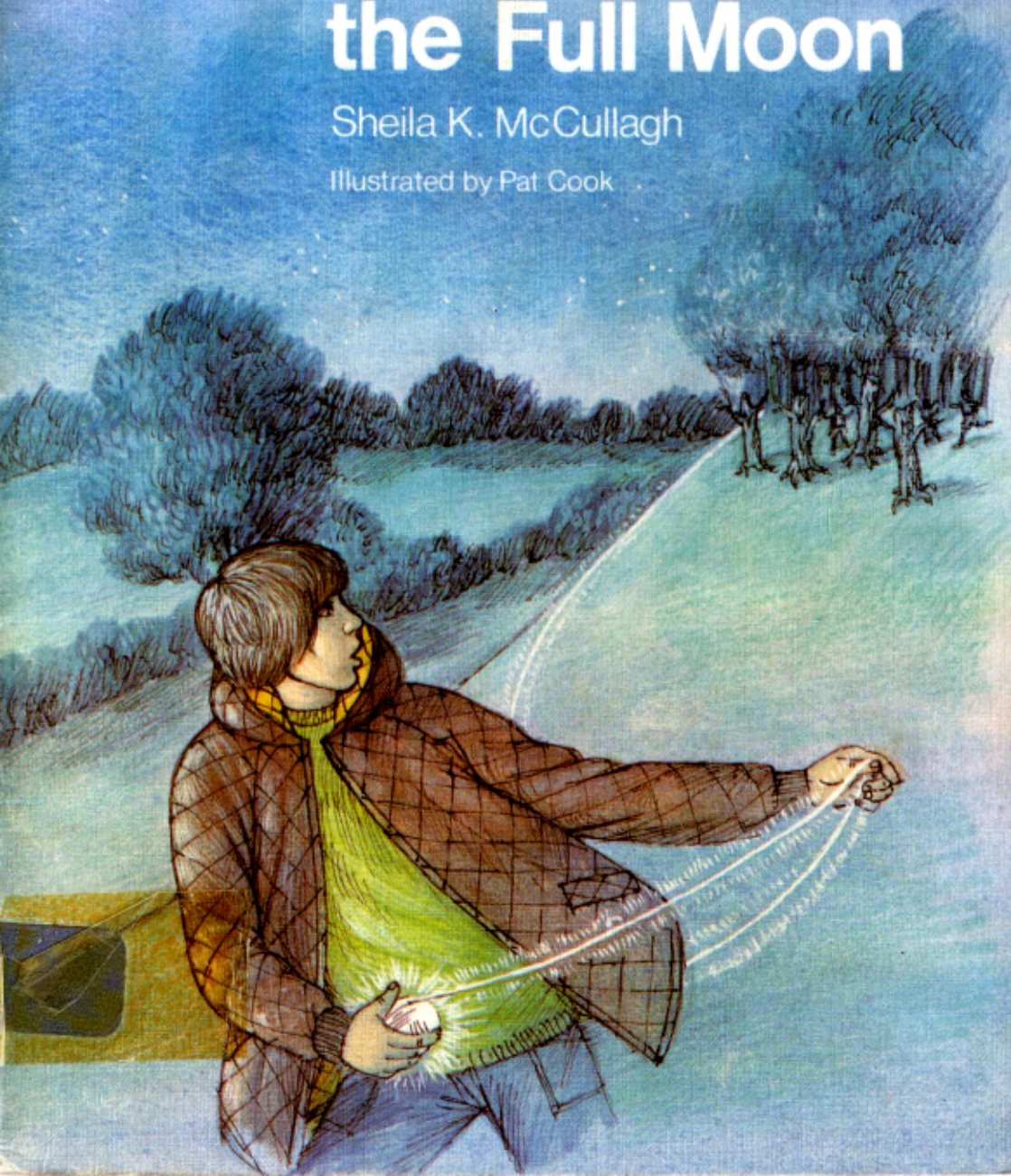


Tim and the Hidden People

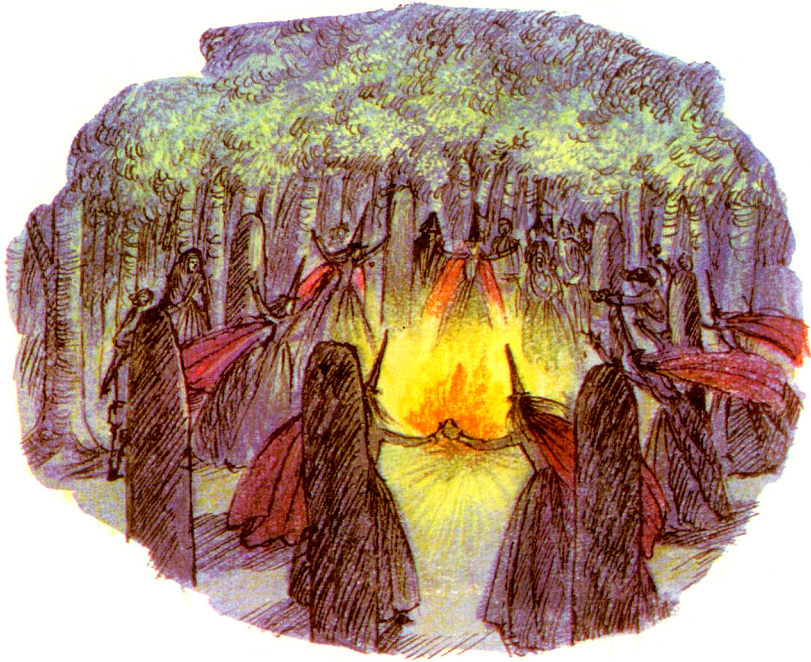
On the Night of the Full Moon

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



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Tim had just finished his apple, when he heard a sound like a stick breaking. He jumped to his feet, and looked along the path.

A great log lay across the grass. As Tim looked, the log heaved itself slowly upright. Two long, bare branches reached out to bar his way.

Two green eyes opened in the stump, shining under the dead branches.

The log moved slowly towards Tim.



For a moment, Tim thought of crossing the canal by the lock gates. But then he remembered what Melinda had said: "You must keep on this side of the canal. Don't come by the road, and whatever happens, don't cross over the water." He must do what Melinda said.

The stump moved nearer.

Tim's hand went to his pocket.

He waited until it was so close that he couldn't miss. Then, as a long bare branch moved towards him, he pulled out one of Melinda's silver coins and threw it at the stump as hard as he could.

As the coin hit the stump, there was a flash of fire. The wooden stump fell to bits. It lay on the path, burning brightly.

Tim ran forward. He jumped across the burning wood, and tore on down the path.

He ran a long way before he stopped to look back. The wood on the path was still burning, but there was no sign of any other stump people.

“The stump man must have gone somewhere,” thought Tim. “The stump people use wood as we use clothes. The stump man has lost his stump, but he’s not dead. I don’t expect he’s even hurt. He can easily find another stump.”

It wasn’t a very comforting thought.

He looked carefully along the path. The path was empty. It lay before him in the moonlight, with the canal and the dark trees to one side, and a field on the other. The sky overhead was bright with stars. The moon shone down. There was no wind, and it was very still.

Tim set off along the path in the moonlight.

He hadn’t gone very far, when he stopped again.





He thought he saw a light somewhere among some trees on his right. There was a clump of tall pine trees by the path. Tim suddenly remembered the storm.

The cottage must be there again!

He crept silently along the path.

He had passed the cottage when he heard the sound of feet running behind him.

Tim stopped and looked back.



The little man with glasses was running along the path after him in the moonlight, and at his side was a big, black shadow.

The shadow came out into the moonlight. For a moment, he thought it was a large dog. Then, suddenly, he knew what it was. It was a wolf.

The little man stopped as Tim turned towards him. Tim could see that he held the wolf back on a light chain. The little man bent down, and snapped the chain open.

The wolf leapt forward.



Tim's hand went to his pocket.
The silver coin hit the wolf full in the chest.

There was no fire this time. The wolf seemed to flatten out suddenly, and fall to the earth like an empty shirt blown off a clothes line.

The wolf-skin rug lay on the path.

The little man turned, and ran off into the trees.

Tim stood there watching for a minute or two, but the little man didn't come back.

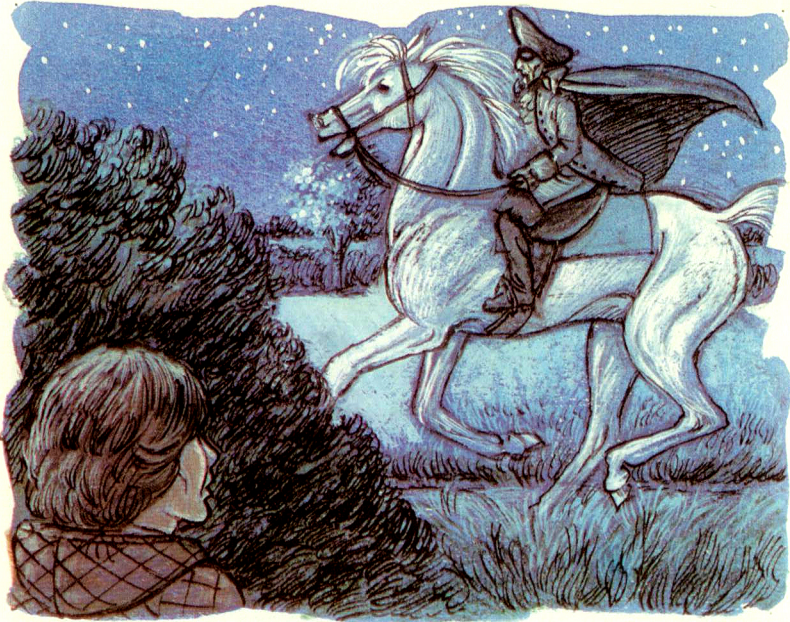
Tim wondered what he would do. The stump-man and the wolf must have been on the path to stop anyone going that way.

Perhaps the little man would run to the wild witches, and tell them that he hadn't stopped Tim. But Tim didn't think he would do that. It would make the wild witches angry, and no one knew what they would do then.

Still, he couldn't be sure. He must be very careful. He had only one coin left.

Tim went on along the path. He kept in the shadows of the trees, and went as silently as he could. The path seemed empty.

At last, he saw Hollow Hill across the canal on his left. The full moon was shining down on the hill, and a bright fire was burning in the ring of trees at the top.



Tim heard the sound of a horse galloping. It was coming nearer. The horse was on his side of the canal!

He dropped into a dark shadow among some bushes on the canal bank. His hand was in his pocket, gripping his last silver coin.

He waited.

The sound of the horse's hoofs came nearer and nearer. Someone was galloping very fast.

The horseman rode by. For a moment, Tim saw a man with a three-cornered hat and a black cloak. Then he was gone.



The sound of the galloping horse died away.
Tim came slowly out of the bushes.

The path was empty again under the moon.
He went on, keeping to the shadows.

It was not long before he came to the bridge.

He could see the dark wood now, where the wild witches were. The canal was higher than the fields on the far side of the road. There was a steep bank down, and then the field sloped sharply up again to the wood, making a deep, wide ditch.

Tim crossed the road, and dropped down the bank into the field. The moon was behind the wood, and the ditch lay in shadow.

He walked quickly, stepping silently over the grass.

The wood was a small one. He was soon past the end of it. He climbed back to the canal path, and looked into the field on the far side of the trees.

There was the pool, shining like silver in the moonlight. It looked as if the water lay in an old quarry, or stone pit, against the slope of the hill. The bank on the far side was almost a little cliff, and a little stream ran over it, falling into the pool in a white waterfall.

At the far side of the pool, he saw a little tree, and a stone jutting out over the water, where the stream ran out of the pool again.





It was just as Melinda had said it would be.

The stream ran on across the field, and under the canal in a big pipe.

The field was empty.

Tim crossed the field to the stone. He slipped the canvas bag off his shoulder, and took out the wooden box with the tiger lid. He lifted out the silver string, and set it down on the stone.



Tim tied one end of the silver string to the little tree, and set off across the field the way he had come, letting the string unwind behind him.

When he came to the bank up to the canal, he looked back.

The string lay like a line of silver light across the grass.

He came to the edge of the wood above the canal. He kept along the ditch in the shadow under the bank, but he knew that if the witches were in the wood, and looked down towards him, they would see the silver string shining.

He hadn't gone far, when he heard a laugh from somewhere in the wood.

He stopped dead, and listened.

There was more laughter. It was wild, strange laughter – wild, frightening laughter.

Tim waited, listening. Nothing happened. He crept on, past the end of the wood, and close to the trees looking down on Melinda's cottage. The cottage was still dark.

Tim peered into the wood. He could see a fire somewhere in the middle of the trees. There were shadows leaping about the fire.

Very softly, he crept on, keeping to the edge of the trees. The ground was higher now.

He had come to the main road, when he saw the little man with the gold rimmed glasses. The little man was hurrying along the road, looking to left and right as he went.



Tim dropped behind a bush.

The little man left the road ahead of him, and made his way into the wood along a little path.

Tim waited until the man was hidden by the trees, and then he began to run.



He ran along to the end of the wood. He could see the little pool below him across the field, when there was a cry from among the trees.

Tim stopped. For a moment there was silence.

Then there was a crashing sound in the wood. There were wild cries in the air, and he could see dark shadows among the trees.

They were coming towards him.

Tim ran. He fled down across the field towards the pool.

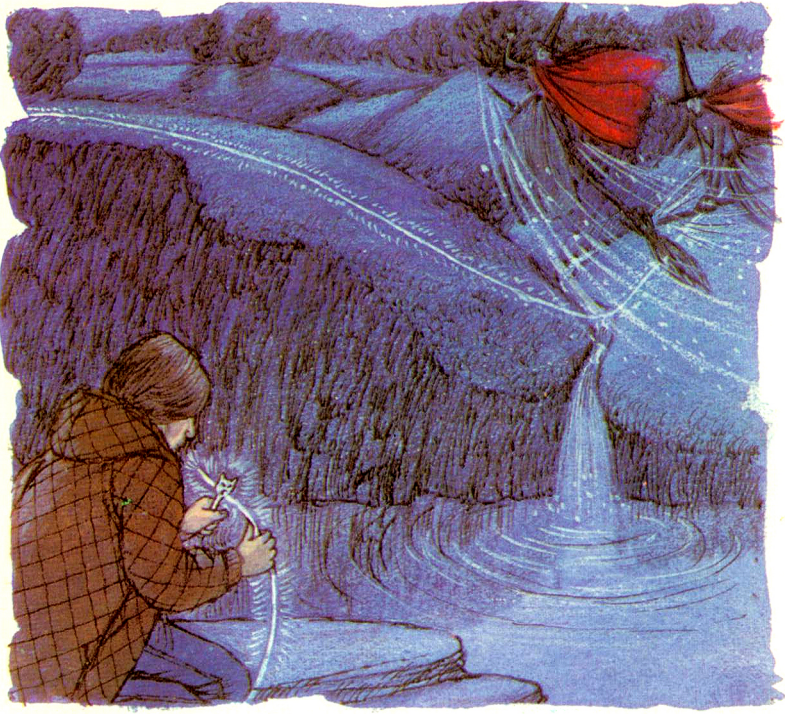


He heard a crash behind him, and took a quick look over his shoulder. The stump people were moving out of the wood. They were not alone. Dark figures broke out of the trees, and came running across the field towards him.



Tim tore down across the grass. His chest hurt him, and his breath came in big gasps.

He jumped across the stream, and ran along the edge of the little cliff above the pool, just as the wild witches broke out of the wood. They were riding their broomsticks, and sweeping over the field towards him.



Tim flung himself down on the rock by the little tree just as the first witch came to the edge of the water.

The silver ball of string had unwound, and he held the end in his hand.

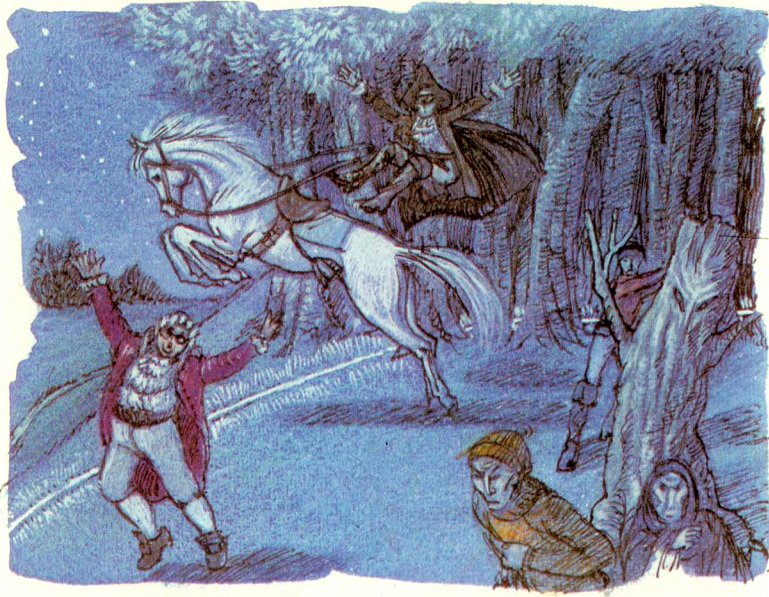
The wild witches swept up into the sky, away from the pool and back towards the wood.

Tim pulled the key out of his pocket. He poked the end of the silver string through the hole in the key, and began to pull.



The string came easily as he pulled. It seemed to cut through trees and stones as if it were cutting through butter. The trees and stones still stood where they were, unharmed.

But it was different with the people running from the wood. The silver string was nearly out of the trees now, and it lay like a giant ring on the grass. As Tim pulled, the ring grew smaller and smaller, and the string fell in a silver pile at his feet.



The people inside the closing ring rushed against the silver string again and again, as if they were trying to cross it, but it seemed like a wall, or an electric wire, which flung them back.

The Highwayman broke out of the trees, just in front of the line of silver string.

He charged towards the string on his horse.

The horse jumped over it, and ran on across the field. But as the horse leapt across the string, the Highwayman was tossed into the air, and he fell back on the grass inside the ring.



There was a sudden rushing in the water at Tim's feet. He looked down at the pool.

The water was swirling round and round in a whirlpool.

A dark hole had opened in the middle of the pool.



As the ring of silver closed, the people from the wood fell into the water.

First, the stump people fell, and were swept round and round and down into the dark hole. Then the others ran to the edge. The little man with glasses flung up his arms, and fell in, but the Highwayman leapt out over the water into the whirlpool.



Last of all, the witches dropped out of the sky with wild cries. They dropped into the very middle of the whirlpool, and were gone.



Tim pulled the last of the string through the hole in the key. As the string left the water, the water grew still. Except for the splash of the waterfall, the pool lay silent under the moon.

Tim dropped down on the rock beside the pile of silver string. He untied the end. Without winding the string into a ball again, he pushed it back into the wooden box, and put on the lid.

His hands were shaking, and he suddenly felt very tired. He picked up the box, and tossed it out into the pool. It sank like a stone.



Tim picked up his canvas bag. He was just slipping it on to his shoulder, when there was a sound like a sigh. The ground around the lake opened.

As Tim watched, trees began to grow. They came up out of the ground, and grew tall in the moonlight.

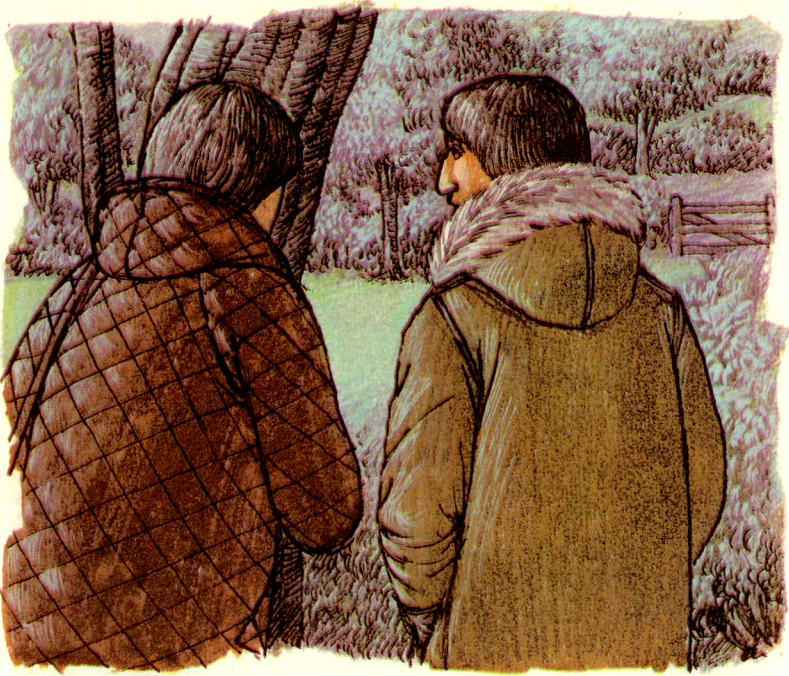
There was an oak tree across the water, and some hawthorn trees beside it.

A stumpy willow grew from the ground by the rock. To his right, Tim saw seven silver birch trees, with white trunks glistening in the moonlight.



A little wind blew across the grass, and the leaves rustled and rustled as if the trees were whispering among themselves.

“The whispering trees!” said Tim softly. “They have all changed into the whispering trees.”



Tim was very tired as he made his way back along the canal bank.

He passed the bridge, and the trees that had hidden the cottage. He didn't even look into them. He knew that the cottage wouldn't be there.

The sky was getting light when he came to the lock gates. A figure was sitting on them. The figure got up, as he came along the path. It was Arun.

"Hallo, Tim," said Arun. "Are you all right?"

“Yes,” said Tim. “They’ve all gone. Everything’s all right now.”

“There’s an early bus back to town along the main road,” said Arun. “I looked it up. Come on.”

They climbed together over a gate, and walked up the field to the main road.

Arun didn’t ask any questions, and Tim said nothing as they waited for the bus.

He was too tired. He would tell Arun about it tomorrow, not now. He knew Arun understood.

The bus came, and they climbed in together.

It was still very early when they said goodbye at the back gate of Tim’s house. Arun went off along the lane, and Tim slipped in at the back door. No one was up.

He climbed slowly up the stairs to his own room, and opened the door.

Captain Jory was sitting in the wooden chair, waiting for him.

“Well, Tim,” said Captain Jory. “You’ve seen the last of the Hidden People in The Yard. We’re back in Hollow Hill again. Your friend Arun can live in the old house now. We shan’t want it. Now, Tim—the key.”

Tim said nothing. He pulled out the key, and gave it to Captain Jory. As the key left his hand, Captain Jory began to fade.

The sun shone in through the window. Captain Jory had gone.

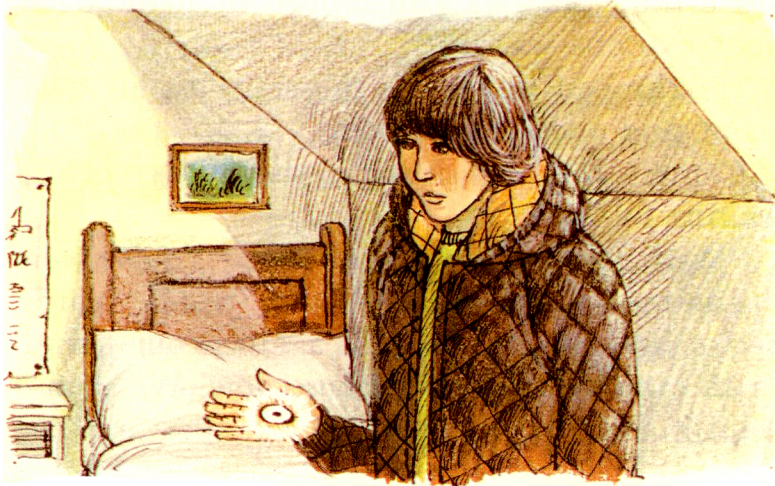
“Well, that’s the end of them,” said Tim.

He was just going to throw himself down on the bed, when he remembered the third coin. He pulled it out of his pocket. It was shining brightly.

Tim looked at the coin for a moment. Then he pushed it back into his pocket with a laugh.

“The end of them?” he said aloud. “I wonder!”

He lay down on the bed, and fell asleep.



Flightpath to Reading B 8



ARNOLD-WHEATON